Grandmother's Cup

By Iryna Matsko

Silence.

Her son had finally fallen asleep, and Olena decided to have a cup of tea. To warm herself.

Her tired hand awkwardly brushed against her favorite cup, shattering the quiet with a loud clatter.

"Crash! Clink-clink-clink…!"

The shards scattered across the floor like shards of a rooster's beak, piercing her heart as well. It felt like it was pecking directly at her heart.

"Damn it!" she exclaimed, tears bursting forth, as though they were just waiting for a reason to spill from her eyes.

This cup had belonged to her grandmother and had traveled with Olena everywhere. It was a piece of home, a connection to her family, her land, her grandmother, with whom she had spent most of her life.

Olena began picking up the pieces. Some were large, others smaller, while the handle had rolled away somewhere beneath the built-in kitchen cabinet. "I'll get it later," she thought. She gathered everything else, unable to bring herself to throw it away. The cup was a part of her, as integrated as an arm or a leg. So she left it in a bag in the kitchen.

Her life had been shattered into pieces more than once. The first time was when her father left, and she and her mother were left alone. He stayed behind to start a new life, and they moved to her grandmother's, where they lived, where she spent most of her time.

Grandma used to paint cups. She was very talented. She would sit on the steps near the house, take out a plain white porcelain cup, paints she'd ordered for them to buy from the city, brushes, and start painting. Leaves, flowers, sometimes strange patterns only she understood. But she always told stories of her life while she worked. And little Olena listened.

Listened about her grandmother's difficult life that had also been broken into pieces by having to leave her homeland, by repressive measures, and being exiled to Siberia for her pro-Ukrainian stance. She returned ill, an aging woman with children in her arms. Olena's grandfather remained in the cold Siberian soil.

Olena learned her family history, where her grandmother had also been forced to piece her life back together, gaining experience just as her ancestors had in similar situations.

"Is it everyone's fate?" she would wonder.

"We have this beast prowling near our fences, causing chaos and not letting us live... But its end will come! You'll see!" her grandmother assured.

Olena believed her and loved listening to her grandmother. Her grandmother, despite her hard life, always had a positive outlook. That's probably where Olena learned to always gather herself, piece by piece, to glue herself together and move forward. Her grandmother taught her that.

Her life broke into pieces again when her mother passed away... and she had to learn how to live again.

But now, in that cup, was her whole life, and it had shattered again with the blare of sirens and explosions. She couldn't remember how she ended up in a distant foreign country, holding only that cup, grasping it as something still tying her to this world, while in the other hand, she held her little son.

He whimpered from the bedroom, as if sensing that his mother was thinking about him…

Her husband remained where pain was a constant, where death walked, where they defended their home, while she was far away, in a foreign land, with her life shattered like this broken cup. Far from home, family, and friends, from the beauty salon she and her husband had built from scratch. Their life had been like a "full cup"—as her grandmother used to say.

Now it was a new life. Everything from the beginning.

But then, would she have the strength when she returned? And when? To whom? And what would remain there?

The war devoured everything. Its iron jaws chewed through human lives voraciously.

Olena, as if in a trance, took out the broken shards from the bag once more and began fitting them together, hoping they would mend.

They didn’t mend. Yet, it seemed that this was her most crucial task, her goal—to glue that cup back together. It meant she could do it, overcome everything, and start her life anew, move forward for the future, which sometimes whimpered in the adjacent room.

She recalled how a friend had dragged her to a psychological workshop on the Japanese art of kintsugi before the war. "Learn from others and don't shun your own!" she had thought then, smiled, and went.

Now she remembered. She took superglue, gold nail powder, a brush like her grandmother’s, and began gluing the small pieces together. She fit them until her favorite grandmother’s cup with flowers was back in her hands, now with golden scars. Without the handle, which she still hadn’t found...

Was it worse? No. It was different—with its spirit, but with the flowers her grandmother had once painted.

Olena poured water into it to moisten her parched throat, dry like an old faucet. Water began seeping through the cracks.

"It's leaking... Perhaps it's impossible to piece together what has already been broken. I’ll seal it with glue, and it will still serve. Now it’s my cup."

The ringing of her phone brutally shattered her world, leaving no hope for a return to her previous life.

"Olena Vasylivna Orlyk?"

“Yes…” her voice trembled like a spider's web.

“Your husband, while performing a duty...” Olena didn’t hear anything beyond that, darkness cloaked her vision.

The cup she had mended, from the pressure or its own accord, shattered into pieces once more in her hands. Blood seeped from the cut across her palm, trickling over the shards among the flowers, leaving a crimson trail. Everything blurred like a 3D illusion.

The receiver was silent.

Silence…

The woman, like a ghost, wiped the blood away, gathered the shards, and sat at the table. Piece by piece, she placed the pieces of her grandmother’s cup back together. Without the handle, which she no longer searched for.

Within minutes, the glue dried. Olena poured water again.

Took a nourishing sip.

Silence.